WALLER APARTMENTS

2840-58 WEST WALNUT STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
DECEMBER, 1987

WALLER APARTMENTS
2840-58 West Walnut Street
Chicago, Illinois

Constructed: 1895

Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright

The design and planning of the Waller Apartments was the result of a collaboration between an unconventional Chicago real-estate broker, Edward Carson Waller, and his equally unconventional architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. As a prominent Chicago real-estate broker, Edward Carson Waller was responsible for the development of many of the city's early tall office buildings, but his interests encompassed a wide variety of social concerns, particularly the problems of providing decent low-cost housing for the city's growing population. As an experiment to demonstrate the feasibility of erecting model apartments for lower income families, Waller commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to develop plans for a multiple unit apartment building to be located on the rapidly developing West Side of Chicago. Waller's choice of architect was auspicious. At the age of twenty-eight, Wright was at the beginning of an architectural career that was to span over half a century and later establish him as one of the most influential forces in shaping modern architectural thought and practice. The collaborative creation of the Waller Apartments marked the beginning of both Waller and Wright's lifelong interests in low-cost housing design, and the resulting structure still survives as an important structure of both sociological and architectural significance.

The concept for the erection of the Waller Apartments was the direct result of the rapid increase in Chicago's population in the late nineteenth century, and the accompanying shortage of adequate housing for individuals and families who held responsible but low-paying jobs in the offices and manufacturing interests of the city. While developers and speculators erected countless apartments for occupancy by middle to upper income groups, few found it desirable or profitable to erect buildings for the city's rapidly increasing lower-income population. As a result, decent low-cost rental units were in extremely short supply, and were often concentrated in crowded blocks of two and three flats or above stores on busy commercial thoroughfares.

The planning of the Waller Apartments early in 1895 was the first attempt in Chicago

to provide adequate housing for lower income families, and it was a testament to Edward C. Waller's expertise in real estate development. Born in 1845 in Maysville, Kentucky, Waller and his family settled in Chicago in 1860, and six years later he established himself in the real estate business. Waller's firm was an active participant in the real estate boom following the Chicago Fire of 1871 and gained its greatest prosperity in the development of the city's earliest tall office buildings in the mid 1880s. Among the buildings developed by Waller's firm was the Home Insurance Building, erected in 1884-85 after plans by William LeBaron Jenney, a structure which is credited as one of the first office structures to incorporate metal framing for the support of the exterior walls, thus introducing metal-framed "skyscrapers" to Chicago and the world. Another notable building developed by Waller was the Rookery Building, an eleven-story office building designed by Burnham and Root in 1885-88 which still remains as one of the Chicago's premier architectural treasures. Waller was an early patron of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The two men probably met through social contacts in their respective west suburban communities, Waller being a resident of River Forest, and Wright being a resident of neighboring Oak Park, Illinois. Wright had established his independent architectural practice in 1893 at the age of 25 after having been previously employed as a draftsman/designer for the noted architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan.

At this early stage of his architectural practice, Wright had clearly developed the basic precepts of his theories of organic architecture, creating highly original works that were a harmonious expression of site, function, and technology rather than of historical precedent or arbitrary artistic expression. Due to the highly creative and distinctive character of Wright's work, he often had difficulty finding clients who were receptive to his architectural philosophy and could accept the distinctive outward character of his buildings. Edward C. Waller was one of the earliest to recognize Wright's genius, and he had the means to provide Wright with a number of substantial commissions of which the Waller Apartments was the first. Other commissions from Waller included the Francisco Terrace addition to the Waller Apartments, erected late in 1895 at 253-57 North Francisco (demolished in 1975); the remodeling of his River Forest home in 1899 (demolished); the iron entrance gate to his estate development in 1901; and the remodeling of the Rookery Building lobby, in 1905. Waller also provided Wright with a number of unexecuted major projects, which included a large multi-building recreational redevelopment of Cheltenham Beach in Chicago in 1895; Lexington Terrace, a block-square low-cost housing development projected for the West Side of Chicago between 1901 and 1909; two schemes for a summer house in Charlevoix, Michigan during 1902 and 1903; and a plan for tract housing in River Forest in 1909. Waller's son, Edward C. Waller Jr. was one of the principal backers of one of Wright's most significant works, the Midway Gardens, an ambitions entertainment and restaurant complex erected in 1913-14 at the southwest corner of 60th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue which was tragically demolished in 1929.

Waller's confidence in Wright's talent and ability was demonstrated by his attempt in the mid-1890s to have Wright secure a position as design associate in the large architectural firm of D. H. Burnham and Company. At a dinner party in Waller's River Forest home, Burnham offered to send Wright to Europe to study architecture, after which time

he would be given a responsible design position with the firm. Feeling that the formal academic traditions as carried out by the Burnham firm were in conflict with his personal creative architectural principles, Wright declined the offer.

The design of the Waller Apartments is a significant milestone in Wright's career, not only for its place in establishing Wright's life-long interest in low-cost housing design, but equally for the development of his architectural thought and practice. Commissioned less than two years after leaving his position as chief draftsman for Adler and Sullivan, the design of the Waller Apartments suggests the influence of Sullivan on Wright's architectural development, yet at the same time it displays the emergence of Wright's distinctive individuality. Particularly noteworthy is the treatment of the street facades which gain their architectural effect from a straightforward, yet creative use of brickwork to create an attractive building at a minimal cost.

Faced in light yellow-buff face brick with matching terra cotta and grey Bedford limestone trim, the Waller Apartments were planned as five contiguous apartment units, each unit containing four one-bedroom apartments. In contrast to the repetitive monotony of many row-buildings of the period, the street facades of the Waller Apartments were designed in a symmetrical composition detailed with a lively juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical elements, defined by simple decorative brick coursing rather than costly applied ornament. With a uniform horizontal treatment at the base and parapets that extends the full width of the facade, the fenestration of the individual units was given a rhythmic, non-repetitive character by the symmetrical variation of the end units from the three identical units at the center. The two end units were identical to each other in design with a distinctly horizontal composition and prominently expressed central arched entry, contrasting with the strong vertical composition and rectangular door openings of the three center units. The formal symmetry of the composition was further emphasized by the slight projection of the end units from the central wall plane. In each unit, a central entry with the doorway set back from the exterior masonry, forming a sheltered open vestibule, led to the four apartments.

While the principal architectural composition of the facade was defined by simple and inexpensive brick coursing, ornamental trim in terra cotta and Bedford limestone was also sparingly used to give warmth and variety to the building. A notable ornamental detail was the terra-cotta cornice and coping which extends across the entire building, forming a simple horizontal slab, with a lower pattern of three dimensional spheres. These spheres had their origin in much of the ornamentation designed by Louis Sullivan while Wright was employed with Adler and Sullivan, and was later adopted and abstracted by Wright in buildings designed throughout his career. The only other use of terra cotta on the facade was an ornamental panel which was part of a decorative second-story window treatment located over the entries of the three center units. Unlike much of Wright's early ornamentation, which was abstracted from forms associated with the work of Louis H. Sullivan, this ornamental panel is unique in its uncharacteristic form and perhaps reflects Wright's search for a personal ornamental grammar. Grey buff limestone was incorporated into the facades as sills, string courses, mullion bases, and capitals, and exterior staircases. The

overall composition reflects Wright's emerging brilliance in the effective use of materials, fulfilling the obligation to create a composition which would be low in construction cost, yet would achieve the attractive and distinctive quality desired for the project.

The interiors were planned to contain twenty four-room apartments, each having a parlor, dining room, bedroom, kitchen with pantry, and a small lavatory. Apartments on the first floor were reached directly from the street through individual entrances inside the open vestibule, while the second-floor apartments had individual staircases for each unit, also located within the central entry. Although the apartments are expressed as row houses on the facade, in actuality a masonry fire wall separated each two-story unit, dividing the building internally into ten individual units.

While the Waller Apartments were intended as a profit-making, rather than a purely philanthropic venture, Waller's social concerns in erecting the building are reflected in the fact that he intended to receive only a 3% return on his investment which was one-half of the expected return on real estate projects of the period. Upon completion, each four-room apartment rented for approximately $12.00 a month and included central steam heat and janitor service. This rental was unusually reasonable for the quality of the facilities offered, and was competitive in price to lesser quality apartments available to lower income families at the time. According to the census data for the building in 1900, the typical apartment was occupied as a "starter" apartment for young, newly married couples. The head of the household was typically employed in a lower managerial position in an office or factory in the city. Among the occupations listed in the 1900 census were "clerk," and "salesman," and "foreman." The length of tenancy was relatively short, with families usually moving to larger quarters after the birth of children or an improvement in their employment and financial position. A number of the apartments were occupied by older widows and widowers, often living with one or more of their grown children.

According to the original drawings for the Waller Apartments, now in the archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, the building was initially planned for the corner of Jackson Boulevard and Kedzie Avenue, but the location was shifted to the Walnut Street prior to construction. The reason for the change of site is not known, and there is no evidence that Waller ever owned property at the Jackson and Kedzie location. A possible reason for the relocation to Walnut Street is that the site was quieter and more suited for residential purposes than the busier Jackson and Kedzie location. A permit was taken out for the construction of the building at the Walnut Street site on March 22, 1895, and the building was presumably ready for occupancy by the end of the year.

Waller's satisfaction with the experimental Waller Apartments project was evidenced by his acquisition later in the year of a large piece of property immediately adjoining to the north along Francisco Avenue which he developed with a larger building following the theme of the earlier structure. Known as Francisco Terrace, the new development was also designed by Wright, the working drawings having been prepared in October 1895, seven months after the drawings for the Waller Apartments. While many reference books on Wright imply that the Waller Apartments were an unsupervised addition to the Francisco

Terrace project, the land acquisition records and Wright's working drawings leave no doubt that the Waller Apartments were the original building in concept, design, and construction, and that the larger Francisco Terrace project was in itself an addition to the earlier structure. While similar in design, scale, and materials to the Waller Apartments, the Francisco Terrace was much larger in scope, having been designed with twice the number of apartments as the Waller Apartments, as well as offering a number of two-bedroom units, in contrast to the one-bedroom apartments of the earlier structure. While some apartments in the Francisco Terrace had direct outside access from Francisco Avenue, the majority of the apartment units were oriented around a interior courtyard, entered from an arched opening centered on the street facade. The ground-floor apartments had direct individual access from the landscaped court, while the second-floor apartments were reached from a continuous open wood gallery which extended around the courtyard and were entered from stair towers at the corners. Upon completion, the Francisco Terrace and the original Waller Apartments portion of the complex were operated as a single unit, diminishing the identity of the Waller Apartments as a separate entity.

In 1901, Waller commissioned Wright to design another amplification of the Waller Apartments/Francisco Terrace scheme, this time consisting of twin three-story buildings occupying a full city block on the West Side, bounded by Lexington Street, Spaulding Avenue, Polk Street, and Homan Avenue. Known as Lexington Terrace, the project was an expansion of the Francisco Terrace plan, with an interlocked double ring of apartment units, the outer ring having front access from the street and the inner ring having front access from an internal landscaped courtyard. Intended to be a mixture of three-, four-, and five-room flats, this ambitious project was planned and revised by Waller and Wright for almost a decade but was never carried out beyond the drawing stage.

The precedent for the profitable design and construction of low-income housing as demonstrated in the Waller Apartments, Francisco Terrace, and the unexecuted Lexington Terrace was later reflected in other projects by various developers and architects in the city. Woodlawn Terrace at 6202-12 South King Drive and South Park Terrace at 6116-34 South King Drive, both designed by architect H. H. Waterman after the turn of the century, follow the plan and format established in the Waller projects, particularly Francisco Terrace. Subsequent philanthropic low-income projects such as the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments, erected in 1929 by Julius Rosenwald at Michigan Avenue and 47th Street, and the Marshall Field Garden Apartments erected in 1929-30 on a two-block-square site bounded by Sedgwick Street, Evergreen Avenue, Hudson Avenue, and Blackhawk Street, similarly follow the concepts established by Waller and Wright thirty-four years before.

Throughout Wright's long architectural career, which continued until his death at the age of 91 in 1959, he continued his interest in the challenges of low-income housing design. Early projects included his designs for model houses which were published in the *Ladies Home Journal* after the turn of the century, and numerous other schemes for planned low-cost housing for various clients and sites. In the 1930s, Wright expanded his planning ideas in the creation of Broadacre City, an unexecuted planned community, as

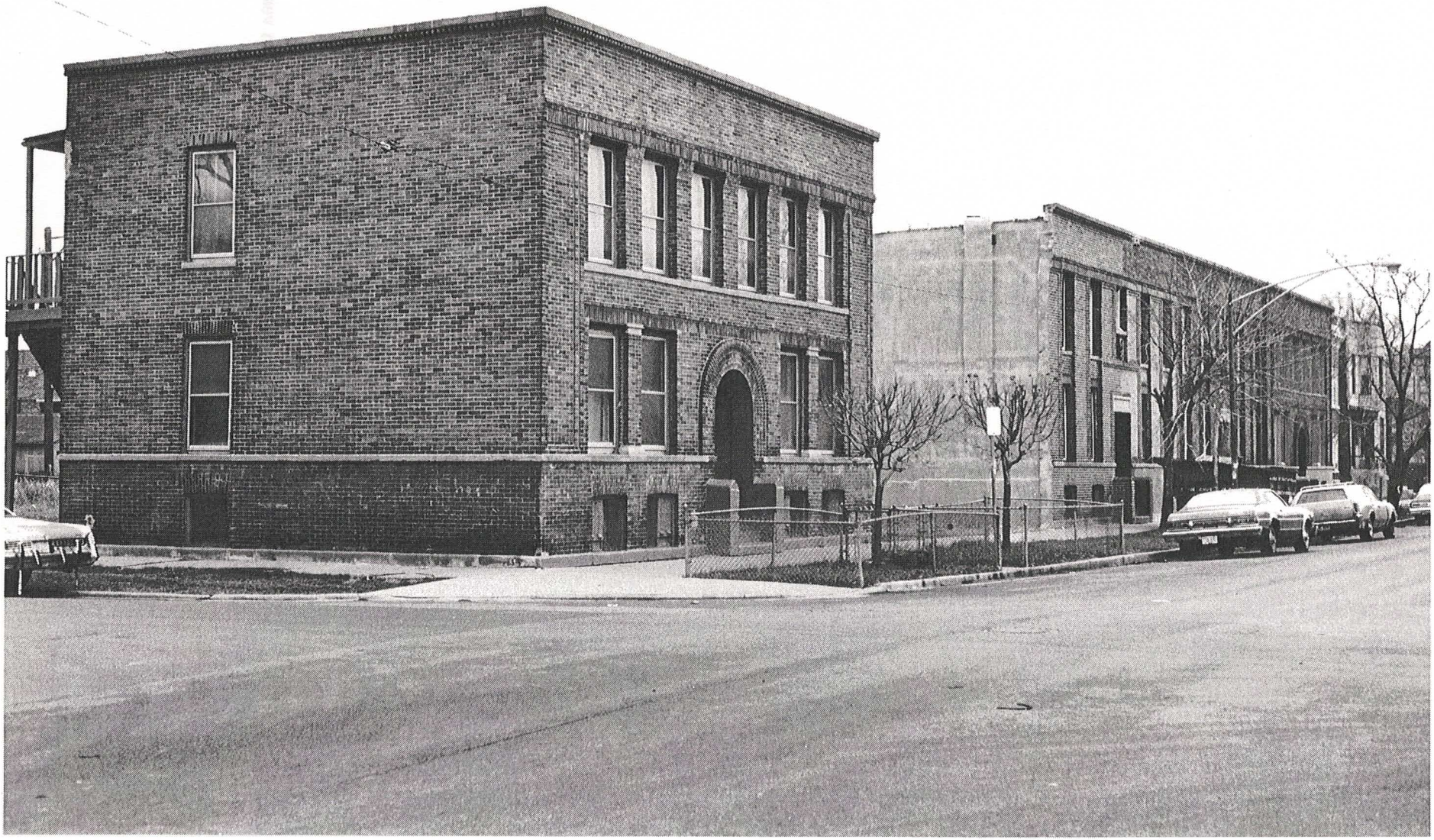
well as in the creation of his low-cost "Usonian" houses, which could be erected on a limited budget by individual homeowners, variations of which were designed by Wright until the end of his career.

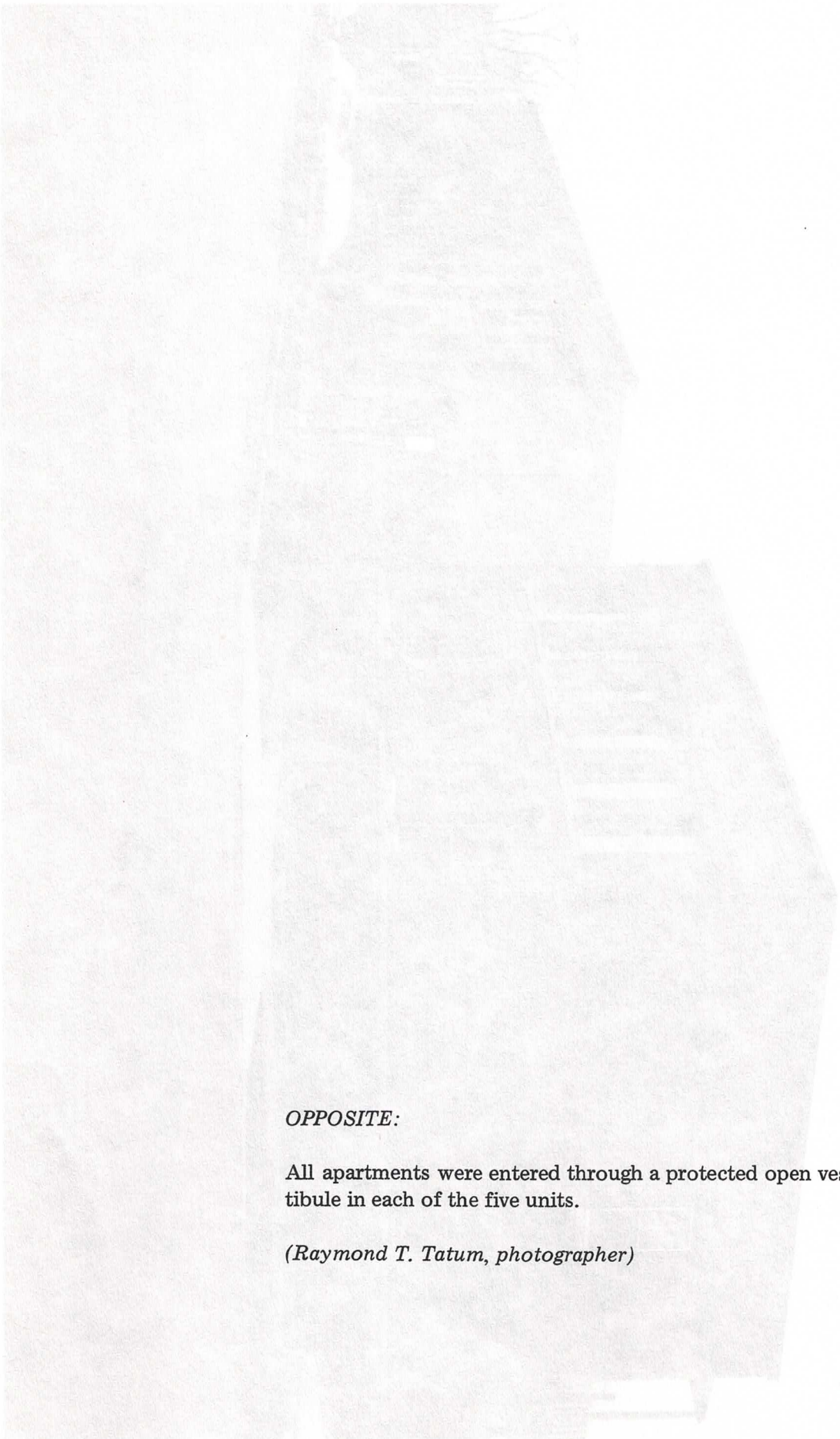
The tangible evidence of Waller and Wright's contributions to low-cost housing development and design have been dealt with harshly over time; with the demolition of Francisco Terrace in 1975 and the loss of one of the apartment row-sections of the Waller Apartments due to fire in 1968. Fortunately, despite the loss of the one unit, the Waller Apartments still maintain a high degree of historical and architectural integrity and are worthy of preservation. Converted into co-operative apartments in 1944, many of the units are now vacant and abandoned, but some are still occupied and well maintained. The survival of the Waller Apartments is fortuitous, both as documentation of Edward C. Waller's pioneering quest to set standards for the development of low-cost housing, as well as establishing a significant milestone in the career of Frank Lloyd Wright and his contributions to international architectural thought and practice.

OPPOSITE:

The street facade of the Waller Apartments was divided into five units, each unit being planned for four apartments. One unit was demolished in 1967 following a fire.

(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer)





OPPOSITE:

All apartments were entered through a protected open vestibule in each of the five units.

(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer)

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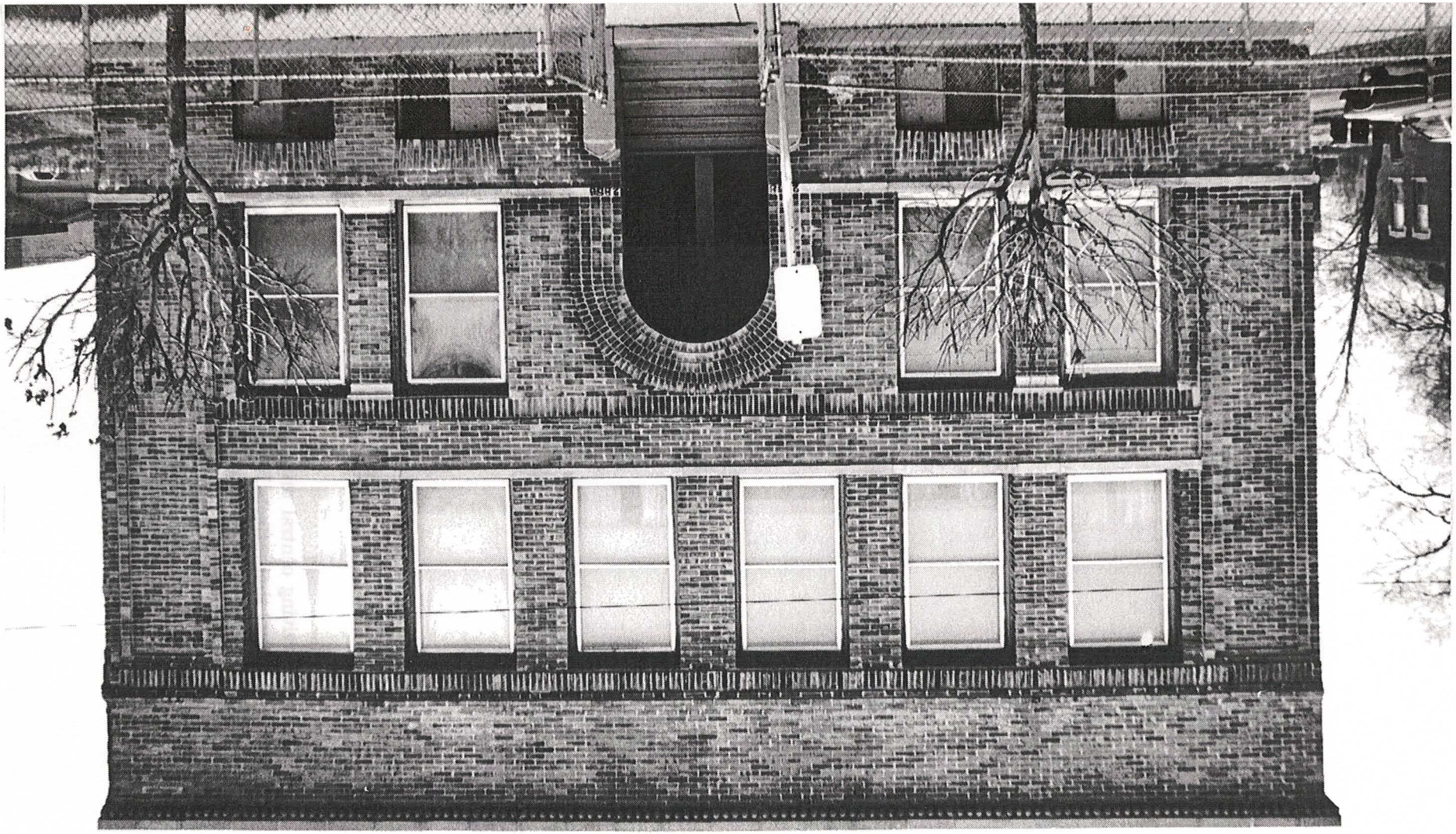
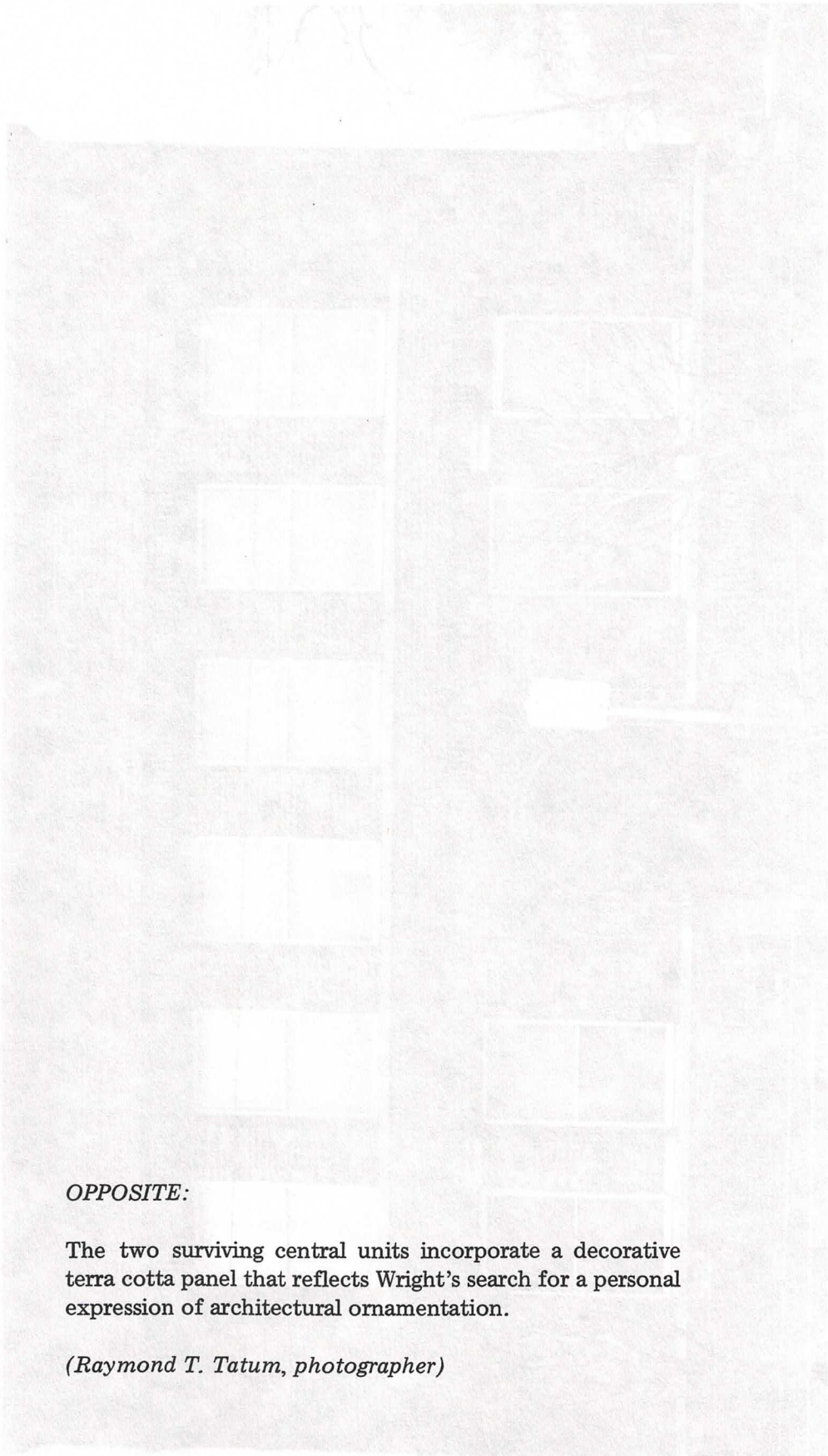
OPPOSITE:

The three center units were identical in design with central rectangular entrances and a distinct vertical composition, balanced by the end units which were horizontally expressed and had arched entrances.

(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer)

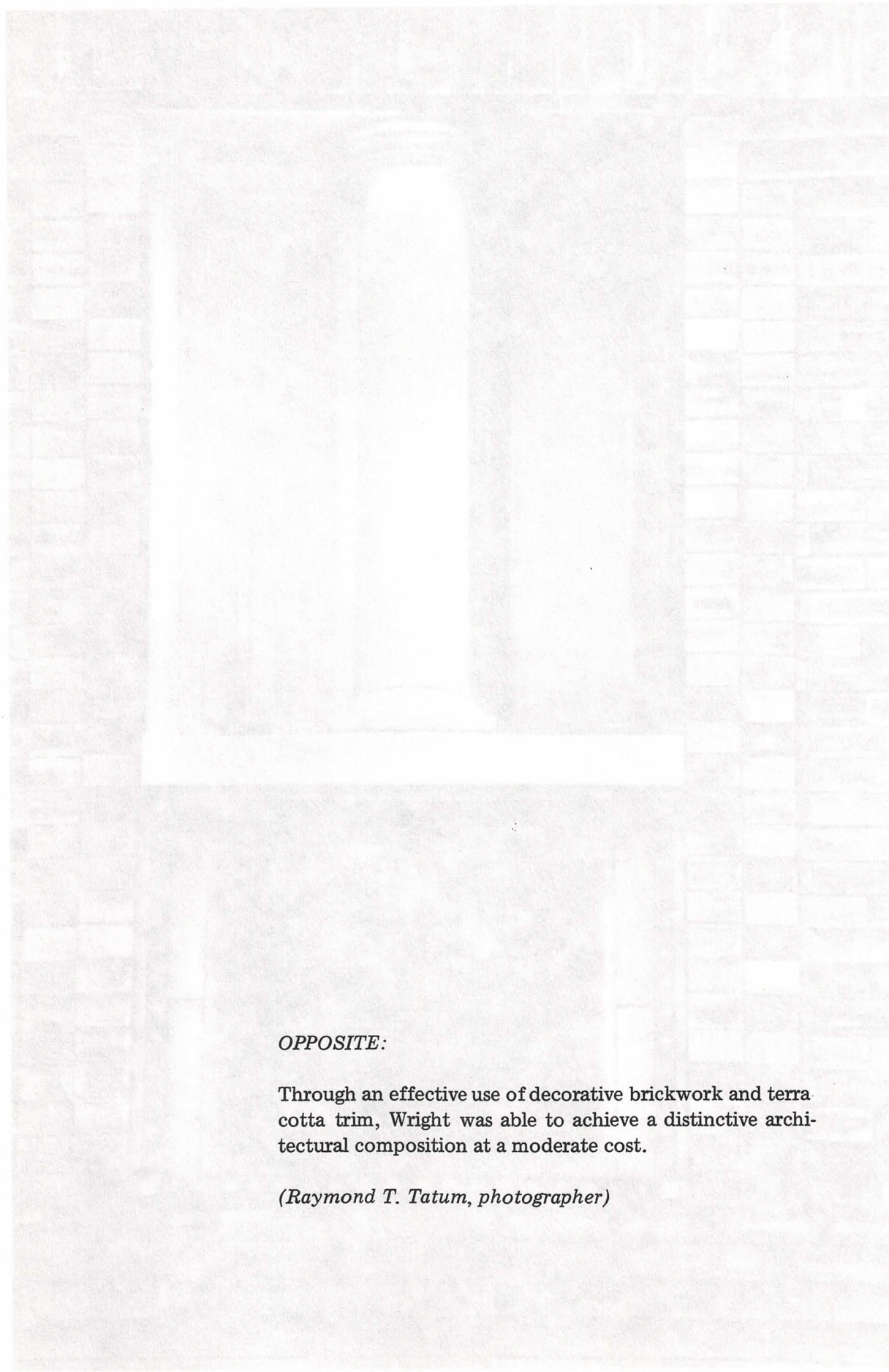




OPPOSITE:

The two surviving central units incorporate a decorative terra cotta panel that reflects Wright's search for a personal expression of architectural ornamentation.

(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

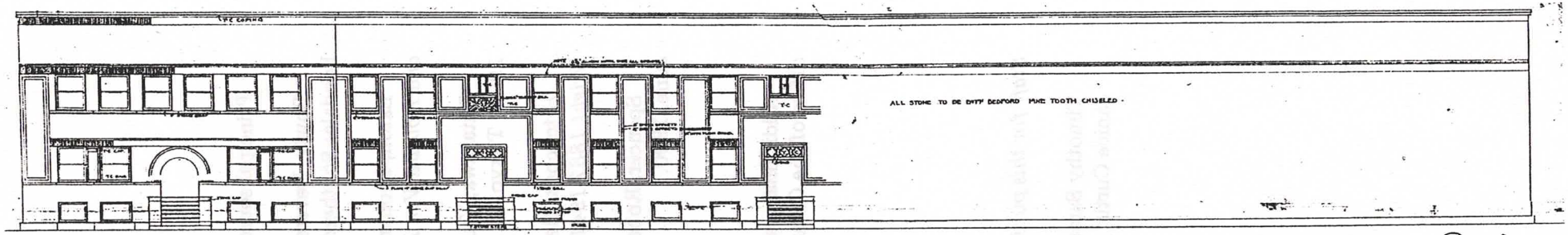
Through an effective use of decorative brickwork and terra cotta trim, Wright was able to achieve a distinctive architectural composition at a moderate cost.

(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer)

OPPOSITE:

While the facade of the Waller Apartments is visually divided into five two-story units, the building in actuality was divided by masonry fire-walls into ten two-story units.

(from *Frank Lloyd Wright Monograph 1887-1901*, 1986)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FRONT ELEVATION
SCALE ⅛"=1'0"
FLAT BUILDING FOR E.C. WALLER ESQ.
JACKSON BOULEVARD AND KEDZIE STREET
FRANK L. WRIGHT ARCHITECT
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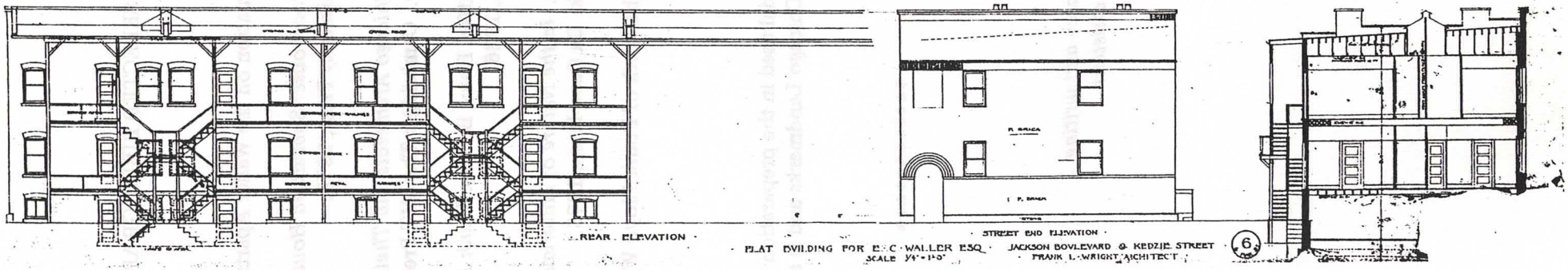
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FRANK L. WRIGHT ARCHITECT
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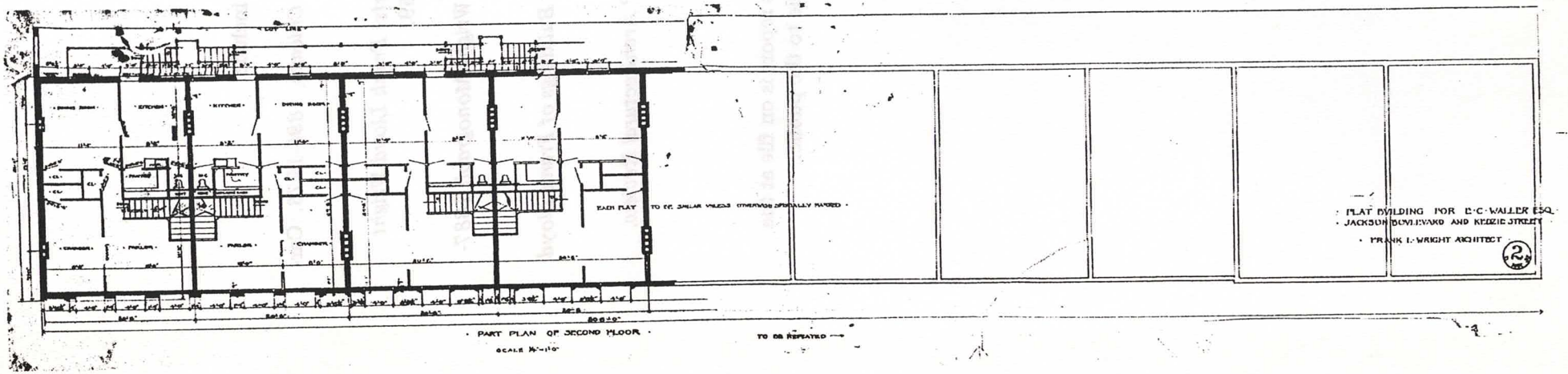
EACH FLAT
PART PLAN OF SECOND FLOOR
SCALE ⅛"=1'0"
TO BE REPEATED
FLAT BUILDING FOR E.C. WALLER ESQ.
JACKSON BOULEVARD AND KEDZIE STREET
FRANK L. WRIGHT ARCHITECT
2

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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Staff for this publication

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION: WALLER APARTMENTS, 2040-58 W. Walnut Street

The staff of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has determined that the Waller Apartments qualify for landmark status under Criteria 1,3,4 and 5 as specified in the Municipal Code of Chicago.

CRITERION 1: Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or any other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Waller Apartments are significant as a pioneering example of planned low-cost housing in the City of Chicago.

CRITERION 3: Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Waller Apartments were developed by Edward C. Waller, who was instrumental in the development of the city's early "skyscrapers" in the late 19th century. Waller was also concerned with social reform causes, as evidenced by his interest in developing low cost housing, as exemplified by the Waller Apartments.

CRITERION 4: Its exemplification of an architectural style or type distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

The fine use of materials to create a composition which was effective yet inexpensive in the Waller Apartments facades is characteristic of the best work of Chicago' creative architectural movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

CRITERION 5: Its identification as the of an architect, designer, engineer or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Waller Apartments are an important early work by Frank Lloyd Wright, who had left the employ of the noted architectural office of Adler & Sullivan two years before. The building shows the outward influence of Sullivan's creative innovations, yet clearly demonstrates Wright's developing personal architectural theories which were later to influence modern world architectural thought and practice.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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